

Everyday Practice

Spanish Language Dzogchen Group Meeting

with James Low

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Question: From the point of view of Dzogchen, how is purification and karma addressed?

Answer: Our karma manifests in two main ways: one is what arises in us as our patterns of thinking and feeling and so on, and the other is what arises around us as the objects we experience. The central focus in dzogchen practice is to stay relaxed and open and not get caught in reactivity towards whatever arises, whether it seems inside me or outside me. When we go about in the world, we experience many of the appearances as neutral – we don't have a strong reaction to them. But some things strongly impact us resulting in positive feelings or negative feelings. We can see that other people do not have the same reaction: they are impacted differently by similar events. When we engage in an activity with a belief in its necessity it is as if the object has a sticky surface, like glue, and my mind also has a corresponding sticky surface. These two come together and adhere, and this gives rise to me performing the action.

The event passes and I may not even remember it, yet the intensity of the causal moment gives rise to a mobilising charge which will pull us into a future situation long after the causal event is forgotten. The susceptibility of the subject to certain appearances and the charge or valency of the object for the individual subject are the outcomes of prior activity — and this is how our karma manifests.

This busy interactive involvement makes it difficult for us to see the illusory nature of both subject and object. The dzogchen view highlights the openness of the unborn ground of all experience. Every occurrence is inseparable from emptiness, appearing yet without inherent existence. Neither subject nor object has actually separated from their open empty ground — no matter how they appear to us when viewed through the delusions of reification. We grasp at the inherently ungraspable and this is the sign of our unawareness, of the opacity of our egoic experience.

However if we open to the unchanging openness of our ground then we release the delusion of duality and so are able to access the richness of experience without merging into it, even when it seems very attractive. In order to open to our actual ground we enter into the Guru Yoga of the White A, relaxing

into the long outbreath, releasing our preoccupations and simply sitting relaxed and at ease in openness, with nothing to protect. Then it becomes clear that everything which arises is simply the radiance of this open ground.

Profound relaxation is vital because we have a tendency to be biased and prejudiced, liking some aspects of what occurs more than others. This leads to arousal and involvement which brings a distortion in our perception of the evenness of everything which is arising. Thus one might think, *“Oh, yes we are all Spanish, but I’m from Barcelona, and I don’t like the people from Madrid! They are Spanish, yes, but not my kind of Spanish!”* So, even although you have a conceptual idea that all occurrences are the same, for example, *“We are all Spanish”*, still there is a little tilt, a habit formation that says, *“This group is better than that group.”* In dzogchen meditation when we experience such tendencies arising, we don’t want to remove them. We do not see them as a mistake or as something wrong for they are actually inseparable from the open empty source. Our starting point is our own openness with which we connect through the Guru Yoga of the White A. We relax and release and open to the open and within this unborn inclusivity there is neither gain nor loss, friend or enemy. If however our starting point is myself as I ordinarily take myself to be then, if I am attempting to free myself from these arisings which I take to be signs of my lostness and obscurity, I am likely to see them as obstacles: *“I’m becoming distracted”* and then seek to apply an antidote. Therefore it is vital to practise the guru yoga on waking in the morning, when you go to sleep at night and at as many moments as possible during the day. Even if the practice lasts only five minutes, by relaxing into the open we see that all that occurs is always already within the open and non-dual with it. This de-reifies phenomena and reveals them as the luminescent clarity of the field of our participation.

We want to see the richness of the mind as it manifests: that all phenomena, all the possibilities of samsara and nirvana, are present within the openness of the mind. Our mind is the vastness of the dharmadhatu, the all-encompassing space within which all dharmas, all phenomena, all experiences, occur. So, if distraction arises, if anger arises, if boredom arises, we just sit with it — not merging into it, not confirming it as important, not taking it as being definitive of who we are. It is just an occurrence that goes by itself. However if we get pulled in and think that something is wrong, and then try to correct it, our own busy activity blinds us to the fact that all of these phenomena are self-arising and self-liberating.

If you believe in the reality of what is arising, this becomes a problem since it will prevent you awakening to nonduality. Does the problem lie in what has arisen in your mind? The fact that you had a negative thought about someone you know — is that the real problem? Or is it that the problem is actually your reaction, your judgment, your evaluation: *“This is a negative thought; I don’t want these thoughts; I need to get rid of them!”*? Maybe it’s my own grasping and solidifying judgment which is transforming this transient phenomenon which is like a little light cloud passing through the sky. I thicken it through the investment of my interpretation. It is my own mental activity which turns the actually ungraspable into the seemingly graspable. I am the root of my problem.

The aim of meditation is to have clarity, so that we remain open to all the varieties of occurrence, yet without dualistic involvement. In all the different systems of dharma dualistic involvement is seen as the main problem. We grasp at and cling to our conceptualised experience of occurrences. We cannot actually grasp nothing. Emptiness offers no basis for grasping. Grasping requires a grasping subject and a reified object that offers a basis for grasping. Grasping is the glue between subject and object yet it also

serves to reinforce the sense that they are inherently separate, otherwise there would be no need for grasping.

We each have our personal map of our world, our idea of how things are and what is required. Our moment by moment involvement in the field of our experience rests on our attempt to get our world to conform to the map we have developed. Our map reflects our history, our interests, our prejudices. It has not been developed on the basis of accurate perception of what is actually occurring. Our ego-self is not a fixed entity but rather a site of subjective interpretations which both invent our sense of the object and highlight the actuality of the phenomenal field. Moreover our ego-self applies the same privileging of interpretation when it considers itself.

Our imagined interpretive map generates our own specific reactions to occurrences. Some people get very agitated if they see that a wasp has flown into their house in the summer, *"I can't settle if that insect is flying around!"* The insect is looking for food; it's not coming to sting you. *"But I don't like it, I can't settle!"* This is the ego's position: *"I know how I like things to be, and if they're not just that way, it makes me upset! I want to be in control, and when I'm not in control I feel agitated!"* This belief generates the feeling that we have to do something. This is what makes us all very, very busy, correcting, improving, trying to get more of what we like and get less of what we don't like. So, from this point of view there's always a lot to be done.

The well-known formulation of dependent arising states that on the basis of this pattern, that pattern arises. When 'this pattern' is taken to be my pattern then my inherent inability to be a separate individual means that changes in the environment, including all the sentient beings I am consciously or unconsciously in touch with, will impact me. Moreover my sense of self is linked to the activity of my mind, my voice and my body, all of which impact my sense of self.

Thus the ego-self, as a thing amongst things, has no means of ensuring its stable continuity. Due to our impulsivity we are often unsure of how we are and what we want. Given this, it is very difficult for us to determine the state of other sentient beings. Even the ones we are close to can seem very challenging in their difference.

The desire for control diminishes our empathic attunement to the lived experience of others. It takes time and focused attention to tune in with the experiences of others — for they all have their own unique map and its specific ways of ignoring the environment. The large scale countries that most of us live in make attention to the difficulties of individuals seem impossible and so people are clumped into groups according to signifiers used by the government. Liberal democracies tend to be more tolerant of minorities and more willing to listen to their needs and demands. More authoritarian governments tend to dislike minorities and all who call for attention to the validity of our pluralistic presentations. Dictators tend to seek unity, an exclusive unity, where those who please the dictator are privileged and those who are deemed other are tightly controlled. Those who wish freedom to exist as they are along with the right to express this publicly are vilified as agitators, troublemakers and terrorists. The anxiety caused by difference, the relativising inherent in accepting that your way of life is both valid for you and not similar to mine, is one that dictators, the masters of the sole truth, cannot tolerate.

Dzogchen suggests an easier way. We could relax with all the complexity of the world. Just relax and open to it, *"Oh this is how it is..."* What is arising has its flavour, this is undeniable, whether it's jealousy,

or envy, or sadness – it's here... and then gone. If I trust that it will vanish, I can sit relaxed, and see that it is here... and then gone. So there's nothing to purify. The mind is self-purifying and inherently free of the stain of duality.

Paper is stained by ink. If we do not want these marks we might say that the paper's purity has been defiled by the ink. When we live within duality each and every entity, including our self, is vulnerable to being marked and stained through contact with something else. Things mark other things. But when we open to the unchanging truth of non-duality we see that our mind is not a thing, our thoughts are not things, and the experiences and phenomena we encounter are not things. In fact there are no self-existing things. No appearance is 'real'. All are illusory, like images in a dream. This is the primordial purity which is unaffected by any occurrence. In fact all that occurs is the non-dual luminescence of the pure empty open ground.

Some people translate 'dzogchen' as 'the great perfection' and then they say that everything is perfect just as it is. This is fine if you see directly that everything that occurs is unborn and beyond the reach of judgement. But if you are operating within duality then you will not experience the intrinsic perfection of what occurs. Within duality if you have a difficult thought in your mind, it is not so perfect. I personally do not use the term 'great perfection' because I feel that it puts too much sugar on the outside. Things are as they are, and then they're gone. They were exactly as they were: sadness, loneliness, self-pity, love, caring. All kinds of experiences come and go. They are neither perfect nor imperfect; they appear in emptiness as emptiness and are beyond evaluatory terms such as 'perfect'. Judgments arise with duality, through which we believe that we are doing something or that something is happening to us. It is only with unawareness that appearances are 'born'. They are actually unborn potential which can manifest many different patterns — all of which remain unborn.

Appearances are like the tubes of paint and the range of brushes in an artist's studio. All the tools are laid out as potential yet the artist only picks up specific tubes and brushes when there is a need for them. The organizing factor is the artist's intention with whatever specific painting they are working on. The colours that the artist is applying are part of the integrity of the painting. If the artist said, "*Oh, I always have to have at least a quarter of the canvas painted orange; I am obsessive about orange!*", then probably they won't be a very great artist.

If we apply this example to ourselves, then when we have a karmic habit and feel the necessity of expressing it too much, it is like the artist applying too much orange paint. It feels right for us because it is our habit, but it is inharmonious with the bigger picture. In dzogchen we focus on the unchanging source, our basic openness, which has the potential to display all possible experiences, good and bad, happy and sad. Resting in that openness the luminescence, the potential, arises instantly as illusory patterns. We are a site of such patternings, appearing as apparitions coming into specific formation according to the situation. We are not a pre-existent entity but an aspect of the variety of display.

As a dualistic example, in your family there might be something you want to say to someone but maybe they're too sick or too old or too young and so you can't say what do you feel you need to say. You have helpfully let the context determine how you manifest. To explain to a child of six the details of why you are getting a divorce from their father is not very helpful. We don't have to act; we don't have to speak. If we abide in non-duality our behaviour is fitting. However when we are in duality our behaviour

arises from me to you — this is the self-focused intentionality which generates karma. The integrity of the field is inherently ethical. The unethical arises with duality.

Question: I have some problems with the balance of compassion and emptiness. For example, a person that is dear to me has got some problems. If I get very close to those problems, they impact me and I lose the clarity. So, it's difficult for me find the best distance, the suitable distance.

Answer: Their problems are their problems. So, perhaps the issue is more about how can you be close to the person without being close to their problem. Even if they are explicitly asking you to help solve their problem, as you have noticed, merging with their problem will not help you solve it. Their problem is that they are merged with their problem. What they need is calm space so that they can, even if only a little, disidentify from the problem. Maybe the kindest or most compassionate approach is just to be with them. They are suffering. In samsara we all suffer. Suffering on your own, being lonely in the suffering, that is very difficult.

This points to one of the reasons we take refuge. Refuge gives us the support of knowing that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are with us. Until our ego position is thinned and dissolves, our main point of reference will be 'my experience'. There is an existential aloneness in our experience. My experience is not shared directly by anyone. We might feel that we understand another person's situation. But let's say there is an apple. I cut it in half. You eat half, I eat the other half. Then I say, "*Hey, this is a good apple!*" and you agree that, "*Yes, it's a good apple.*" However I cannot know how it tastes for you. There is something unique and alone and specific in how the apple's flavour arises for you and how it arises for me. We can exchange words and concepts about 'the apple' and this can give us the sense of a shared experience but an exchange of concepts is not the same as a direct experience.

As individuals we each have our own experience. We can only approximate to another person's narrative account of the experience, yet the experience itself is not a thing and is inherently beyond being an object of mind. Very often, when we try to help people, we do not open to their precise revelation of aspects of themselves. Rather we pull them into our frame of reference and give them advice arising from our position. From the point of view of dharma it is more useful to remain calm and open and support them so that they can be close to their experience. This is likely to be more helpful than mixing their conceptual expression about themselves with our conceptual interpretation of what we hear them saying.

What is arriving in their life is theirs. It is the manifestation of their karma. By being with them yet without involvement we are not abandoning them. No matter how close we feel, no matter how we seem to fuse with them, we will never exactly get the sense of how it is for them. However, if we can support them to be relaxed and mindfully in touch with what is happening, it may be that the mood of '*It will be okay. We'll find a way*' allows the person to see how the difficulties of the situation or the problem are made more dense by their own preoccupation with them. Our neutral non-judgmental attention models how the other might loosen their enmeshment in their troubles.

The troubles do not suddenly vanish yet when there is disengagement they can be seen more clearly as patterns of experience arising from diverse causes and conditions. The troubles have no inherent existence; their power lies in the importance and reality that we attribute to them. We are a pattern of emptiness burdened by patterns of emptiness! However we conceptualise and invest in them, these troubles are actually inseparable from emptiness. In their unborn simplicity, they arise and vanish. They

are patterns of phenomena devoid of substance. But once we start to think, *“Oh, my shoulder is sore; maybe I need to get some massage. Oh, maybe this is serious, maybe I need an x-ray?!”* then many anxious thoughts, are sucked into this pattern of very transient sensations.

In life difficult situations arise, perhaps a child is dying or someone loses their sight. If the problem was easy to solve it would probably be solved by now so maybe it is something that has to be lived with. In which case, if you are calmly present with the person, and keep your breathing deep and even, then you can be open to however they want to present the situation. If you remain clear and grounded you can be empathetic and responsive without being pulled into a rescuing role.

This is helpful because you are not offering false hope but are helping them to centre and gather their resources so that they can face what they have to face without being overwhelmed. This helps to avoid a lock-on between the victim and the rescuer, where we may be trapped in the role of rescuer, and they may be trapped in the role of victim. Then it is difficult to find a way out.

So, if we stay with the simplicity of what is arising and avoid solidifying conclusions, this can help the interpersonal field remain dynamic and open and allow you to respond with genuine availability.

Question: How is it that one passes from fresh experience to experience mediated by thought? And how to go back to the fresh experience?

Answer: Let's continue with the example of the artist's studio. When the artist comes into the studio in the morning, they take the covering off the half-finished painting and look at it. The painting shows itself and invites the artist into participation. It shows them what should be done. If the artist has prepared some idea in their mind, that idea could be out of harmony with what has already been placed on the canvas. They would be projecting their idea onto the canvas rather than entering into conversation with the colours and shapes that are already on the canvas.

This is our issue in so many situations. Do we fixate on our own monologue, or can we ease ourselves out and become available for genuine dialogue? In order to promote the latter we relax and open and free ourselves from our prejudices, our habitual patterns, our tendencies. If we can be honest with ourselves we will see that we are easily distracted and that the jumble of our thoughts, feelings, memories and so on can be quite incoherent. Our ego self cannot sort itself out, even if it were truly wanting to do so. Therefore when we come into situations at work or in relationships it is vital that we employ the view of non-duality as we participate in whatever is the emerging situation. Normally we think, *“It's a good idea to have perspective so I will step back and see clearly. I am not involved with you guys and so I can see clearly what you are doing. I am the subject; you are the object of my interpretations.”* Then I will rest in myself and think clearly about what I will say and do. That is the ordinary way of proceeding. Everything is being mediated through my sense of self. It is normal for people to prepare for meetings and to think in advance about what they want to say. We pre-position ourselves.

However the path of dzogchen is a path of connective intuitive spontaneity. This is why we meditate with our eyes open: I am sitting with the world. I'm not going into myself and away from the world. I'm not blocking experience but resting in the openness that remains unentangled whatever occurs.

At this moment I feel some tension in my chest because I have a bit of a cold, and I hear a car going by on the road outside. Both of these events have the same status as being empty experience. Neither experience is other than transient. They are both empty of inherent existence and cannot be caught by any thoughts I might have about them. In fact I cannot think about them as they are, I can only think about my idea of what has occurred. By remaining open and free of judgement the threshold between me and the world becomes smaller and smaller. With practise we come to see that outside and inside arise together and that self and other arise together. The clarity of this reveals that there has never been any separation or errancy. All that arises, arises together. Moreover arisings do not arise from the ground but *with* the ground. The intrinsic integrity of the whole has been complete from the very beginningless beginning. There is no difference between the co-emergence of the ground and arisings and the co-emergence of arisings.

On a relative level we can get a sense of this by recalling that when you meet a friend in a café you have a chat. The conversation goes here and there, and you enjoy each other's company. Being relaxed with each other, participation is easy and spontaneous. However if you are in a work situation and have to make a presentation the other people in the room are not exactly friends. You may well fear, *"Oh, oh, they are going to be judging me. I'd better do this well!"* This may be true but since you don't know what is in their minds, what do you might be very good yet still not please them. Or imagine that what you say is wonderful —clear, precise and very useful — but the reaction you get is envy! People are not clapping, they're thinking *"Oh, big guy, hm, hm..."*. It's very difficult to please other people.

So, the key point here is how to avoid letting our anxiety dominate our experience. Only if I relax and let go of my emergent negative scenarios am I likely to be able to truly trust the self-organizing quality of connectivity. If I think to say some things believing that they will please some people, and other things because they will please other people, then I will become very artificial and am even more likely to lose contact with my audience.

However if I trust the simple integrity of what I am saying as I connect with other people then this is likely to be helpful. Therefore we should always look at other people – not looking at them trying to work out what's happening for them – but looking in a way that allows us to receive the felt presence of these people. If we do this then what we receive energetically is likely to inform how we speak. When our activity is arising from connectivity we experience non-dual communication. The unified field, the undivided field of participation is speaking through me, rather than: *"I am speaking to you"*. If you open yourself in this way then you won't have a big gap between, *"I am in my practice, but now I'm going out into the world and it's very different."*

Opening to the energy of the living subjectivity of the other is inhibited by the process of 'thinking about' them. Thinking about someone may feel as if it brings about a deeper connectivity but in fact we are developing an image of the other. Then when I speak to you, my images of me and you lie between you and me just as your images of you and me lie between us. These mediated encounters both veil the immediacy of how we are in the moment and strengthen our images of each other and of ourselves. Personally I do not think it is a good idea to think a lot about people. We like to have the idea that people think about us and miss us, but actually who are they thinking about when they think of us? Who do they miss when they miss us? The only one I can miss is my idea of you! Rather than thinking about the other we have to trust in their basic availability. If we can connect on that level we can remain open to their potential for connectivity despite whatever problems occur.

Consider, for example, the Christian tradition. When Jesus is meeting with his disciples for their last supper, the last time, he says to them, *“Here, have some bread, have some wine. We love each other but I’m not going to be here for ever.”* He is indicating that if they merely think about him, he will be an idea. So he says, *“Look, I’m breaking the bread. I’m not an idea.”* That is the basis for the Eucharist in the mass. When the priest comes, he says, *“This bread is the flesh of Christ; this wine is the blood of Christ.”* If you take this and you believe then it is not as an idea but as a fact. Then you are transformed by the transformed substance. The sacrament is consubstantiation: this is the actual flesh and blood of Christ. Now God has come into me; God and I are one. This is the second and more mystical consubstantiation and one which orthodoxy has some difficulties with.

Jesus becomes the Christ by letting go of his self-referential wishes. He becomes universally available as both a symbol of God's love and its actual presence. Paul, in his letter to the people of Phillippi, says that Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant”. The Greek word used to describe this is *kenosis* which indicates ‘self-emptying’. In order to truly and completely transform we have to open to complete self-emptying. This is what we do in the Padmasambhava practice. Each stage of the practice takes us out of our familiar karmic identity so that we can become nondual with Padmasambhava. Refuge says, “I need you”. Bodhicitta says, “I am for the other”. The Seven-Branch Practice generates merit to be dedicated to the welfare of others. Devotion releases egotism and self-cherishing. Visualisation and mantra bring us into alignment with Padmasambhava so that the four moments of the reception of light can de-solidify all traces of the ego-self.

Our buddha nature is intrinsic. The path is not a process of going somewhere new but of letting go of our obscuring personal identity. We are self-emptying with the blessing of the ever-empty ever-full presence of Padmasambhava.

All the major religions are concerned to help their followers connect with the limitless. The dualistic religions are concerned not to encourage identification with God as that is considered heresy. In non-dual tantra the meditation deity is a key method for finding ourselves in our true nature, the inseparability of the three kayas, the trinity of awakened presence.

The practice of Padmasambhava is concerned with direct experience. If there is no direct experience, if the heart is not open to the blessing of the actual presence of the divine, then we are left in the desert of ideas about the divine. The main point is to enter unmediated living experience.

The heart of the ritual of Padmasambhava is to pray and receive his light and believe and experience that all your difficulties are washed away and that your body fills with light. You then merge with him in his light and through this you enter into emptiness. This is the heart of the practice, the actual door to non-duality.